Perspective-Taking in the Classroom:

Engaging Students in Young Adult Novels with Non-Traditional Cultures and Issues

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

This paper examines research in the field of Young Adult Literature in order to look more closely at issues of the genre in terms of diverse texts. Research on multi-cultural literature, and perspective-taking strategies for English classrooms are focused on in the paper. The research serves as a basis for an exploration into applying strategies to effectively teach diverse, Young Adult texts in the classroom with the goal of improving critical thinking and literacy skills.

Keywords: multi-cultural literature, perspective taking, Young Adult Literature

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Artist's Statement

For my honors thesis project, I decided to write a scholarly journal article (targeting the *ALAN Review*, a journal sponsored by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council for Teachers of English). Writing a journal article for publication was challenging in its own unique ways. The product ended up being shorter than most traditional honors thesis submissions, but the dynamics of the research and writing were equally complex and challenging. There were constraints given by the journal I am hoping to become published in. The *ALAN Review* requires submissions to be less than twenty pages, which proved challenging. Writing is something that I do frequently, and generally I am someone that over-writes. My writing is typically verbose and overly explained. In this scenario, I knew I would have to keep my writing in order; It would have to be tight and concise.

Beyond the length difference in the two writing styles, a journal article turned out to be vastly different in style and language. Academic language was appropriate, but it needed to be limited. The best way to think about the article was in terms of readership. A reader of the *ALAN Review* may have little to no prior knowledge about my topic, while a professor in English Education would know the academic jargon and be familiar with the concept.

Considering my audience, the guidelines of the *ALAN Review*, and the stylistic differences pushed my writing abilities and deepened the intellectual effort required to write the article effectively. The article took many more revisions of diction. I had to go through the different drafts and carefully consider each word. To help myself learn and write in the correct style, I read various articles published in ALAN and then compared my article to those articles in terms of language, arrangement, and style. I also had great challenges defining terms and creating tight examples that would be understandable and clear to an outside audience. I had never previously written a paper where my audience had limited prior knowledge of the topic. My advisor and I consistently

corresponded and worked on correcting and honing in on effective and clear examples of the concepts that I was explaining.

The length constraint and the stylistic differences made it difficult to select examples from the novels that I was writing about. My goal was to explain how the novels could be effective choices for implementing perspective taking. This means I first had to prove that the novels were good choices for perspective taking, and then provide an example and explanation of why. This became difficult because of the page constraints. Additionally, I had to make sure I was choosing examples and explaining the novels in a way that someone that has no prior knowledge of the novel would understand.

My thesis originally started out focusing on empathetic response and the theories of empathetic response. It was highly theoretical and the research was dense. My first three drafts continued with empathy as the focus, and then once I started having to cut down the length of the paper to fit the requirement, my advisor and I decided to switch directions. At the start, the first two-thirds of the paper was theory and research, while the last third was the application. She suggested reading about perspective taking in the English classroom to see if there would be any additional connections, and that readers of *ALAN Review* would be interested in practical, classroom-oriented ideas. That is when my project took a shift. Empathy became a secondary notion, and perspective taking became the focus, thus moving the project from the theoretical to the practical. The shift between paper and article encouraged this shift because perspective taking and empathy are similar and have similar goals, but perspective taking is much more practical and simple to explain.

As a result of the differences between the two writing styles, my research, revising, and writing went on for several drafts. The continual need for punctuality and spot on diction increased the level of engagement needed to complete the article. To many, the brevity can make the depth

and work seem lesser than a longer piece of writing, but the scope and constraints of writing in the style of a journal actually proved more challenging and time consuming for me as a writer and thinker.

Perspective-Taking in the Classroom:

Engaging Students in Novels with Non-Traditional Cultures and Issues

Literature can send readers headfirst into different worlds. Through literature, readers – students, teachers, and others- can experience different time periods, historical events, life circumstances, new cultures, and a range of emotions. Readers experience texts in different ways depending on what they bring to the text. The familial experiences, the environments where the reader lives, and the situations the reader has been through affect how they experience the text. Simply stated: different readers prefer and experience different genres, plotlines, and character traits in unique ways – there is no "one book fits all" when it comes to literature. Young adult readers, those readers between the ages of thirteen and nineteen (Koss and Teale, 2009, pg. 563), are particularly diverse. That being said, Young Adult literature is essentially the genre that "bridges the gap between children's literature and adult literature," (Cole, 2009, pg. 49). The wide range of interest, ability, and availability of texts creates need for highly individualized reading experiences. Some readers have an intended purpose for reading. Some readers are required to read material for school, some read for information, some also read to enhance or further their jobs and careers, while others are just reading for entertainment. Reading is a highly exploratory and individual activity.

Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith (2014) explain that adolescent readers can have a range of reactions to literature, but that during the reading experience, readers are "overcoming the constraints of one's life and doing things through imagination that one could not, and would not, want to do in real life," (p. 36). In short, reading experiences can present all readers with

opportunities for exploration, including self-discovery, world-discovery, or the discovery of new knowledge.

As a pre-service teacher in my final stages of college preparation, I have seen students in the middle grades reading for many purposes. However, I see a lack of inclusion of multi-cultural texts in these English classrooms. While my experience in classrooms is limited to a small number and geographic area, the research in the young adult genre supports what I am observing. Young Adult literature is essentially the genre that "bridges the gap between children's literature and adult literature," (Cole, 2009, pg. 49). In a study of the trends in Young Adult Literature, it was found that "the characters are primarily white European American, and there is a significant lack of focal multicultural characters, especially a lack of books that are culturally specific" (Koss and Teale, 2009, p. 569). The study also noted that Young Adult novels do still have some focus on social issues, but the larger focus has shifted to a focus on the everyday life of being a teenager (Koss and Teale, 2009, p. 567).

My concern is that the focus in Young Adult Literature has been dominated by the idea of self-discovery and representing the everyday life. Looking at the race for self-discovery and everyday life in tandem with the majority of characters represented being European American presents a problem: exclusion. The intense focus in one type of Young Adult text and one type of character means that other types of texts and characters are being pushed to the wayside. This focus impacts young adult readers as a group, and it also has an effect on individual readers within the larger group. It could mean that young adult readers broadly assume and accept that they should be reading texts with similar characters and situations, in order to achieve some level of self-discovery. When this occurs on an individual or group level, it becomes more difficult for any individual to go against the paradigm. It becomes difficult to locate differing texts and

further it makes it more difficult for the reader to consider and respond to the different type of text in an unbiased way.

Given these concerns, I hope to provide examples of texts that might offer different kinds of reading – readings that may still allow for self-discovery, but also cultural expansion. First, I will discuss creating a classroom focused on cultural access and ethical reading and how perspective taking can help in that process. Then I will use my understanding and synthesis of the research to demonstrate the opportunities young readers have to imagine and self-discover, through perspective taking, in two multi-cultural and non-traditional young adult novels: Patricia McCormick's *Sold* and Eliot Schrefer's *Endangered.* I will discuss how young readers have the opportunity to experience situations and cultures outside of their immediately familiar world, and how teachers can help students get there. Following this sequence will allow me to demonstrate how different reading responses and strategies can be used to engage students in critical examinations of different types of texts.

Authentic Reading: The Cultural Access Classroom

If authentic reading experiences are ones meant to push students to critically respond to a text free of bias and with no social or academic risks, then how do we create opportunities for students to engage in such experiences? Establishing purpose and expectation for classroom reading is a starting point. This means that teachers create classroom environments that help students understand why they read certain texts, and understand classroom expectations for reading these texts. This is especially important when teachers want to approach reading as a means of creating cultural access. In a cultural access centered classroom, readers become active meaning makers, and these readers are given access to a variety of texts that explore and present

a variety of cultural perspectives (Beach, 2006, p. 82). Framing a classroom, or a reading culture, based on the principle of cultural access focuses on texts that are diverse in culture, content, and language, making such texts a main aspect of the reading curriculum. Basically, making the decision to teach and allow students to read for cultural access, provides space for active and authentic meaning making, while exposing students to many cultural perspectives.

Research shows that students have a difficult time making connections with texts that are outside their normal life and preconceived expectations for reading. Readers – young and old – often experience tensions between their culture and the cultures of the multi-cultural texts because of the apparent disconnect between the two (Sloan and Thein, 2012, p. 313-14). This is problematic and brings readers to a breaking point where they do one of two things: fight through the tension, or give up. The second option is what we, as teachers, are trying to avoid. As teachers and facilitators of learning, we can promote and encourage students to explore these different, multi-cultural, texts through the concept of perspective taking.

Perspective Taking: What is it and What Does it Look Like?

Perspective taking is "a habit of mind that can help students acknowledge that other ways of understanding the world do exist and are worth considering or at least recognizing, even if they choose not to agree with those perspectives," (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, Pg. 55). In other words, perspective taking is inviting individual readers to recognize that there are different cultures, ideas, and lifestyles, but it does not mean that the individual has to accept the differences as their own. Perspective taking allows students to deal with the tensions they feel and experience between their beliefs and the beliefs of the text in a controlled and low-risk way (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, Pg. 55). Encouraging recognition of others' ways of understanding

or others' beliefs without requiring that students change their own beliefs allows for cultural access, because the students are not being asked to change their perceptions. The goal is not changing a student's belief – the goal is for the student to try to listen to or consider the beliefs or experiences of others. As a result, students are given the opportunity to access different perspectives in a more directed process.

Perspective taking situates readers within a reasonable proximity to unfamiliar worlds, ideas, and cultures (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg.55). This means that the strategy does not force students to assimilate their culture, but rather provides them with the tools to explore what they believe and practice in relation to differing beliefs and practices (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 55). The end goal of perspective taking is not immense and noticeable social change, but rather for students to have "an increased willingness to 'try on' different perspectives," (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 55).

Text Selection for Perspective Taking

Perspective taking is a strategy to improve reading, but there are also other things a teacher can do that can enhance the experience of implementing and using perspective taking inside the classroom. Choosing the right text, and a good text, for perspective taking is important to the level of success seen from perspective taking (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 57). When choosing a text to implement perspective taking, texts that offer different perspectives within themselves are a safe choice (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 57). Additionally, texts where the characters or society is experiencing a tension within their own belief system can be beneficial for perspective taking (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 57). These two criteria are important to consider because both of them are implicitly able to help the reader consider other perspectives while the reader is explicitly being encouraged to consider alternate perspectives.

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is popular among schools, and it is commonly included in the high school curriculum. This text is great for many reasons, but it also is a good selection for perspective taking. Ralph and the gang of boys experience great tensions throughout the entire novel. They have to figure out how to survive, how to function, and ultimately what and who else to believe on the island without the help of adults. By the novel's end, the survivors are unsure of how to respond to the rescuers. The unusual situation that the characters face as well as the tension the boys face in their personal beliefs presents opportunities for perspective taking. The readers can engage with the characters and experience what it is like to consider alternate perspectives through the characters, in a secondary way.

Another classic young adult text that fits the criteria for perspective taking is *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976). In this novel, there is a great deal of tension between races. The setting, 1930s in the South, gives historical characteristics to the novel. The tensions between races in the novel can be analyzed based on historical concepts in American history (Taylor, 1976). This allows the reader the opportunity to see what happened historically and what happens in the novel before they form their own opinions and conclusions about the thematic content. For example, Cassie's father discusses with her why it is important to understand the differences and tensions between white families and African-American families. As African-Americans, they have to make decisions based on the principles of a discriminatory culture while they are the victim. It provides great opportunity for perspective taking because the tension is high and the characters themselves are consistently evaluating their decisions based on the white societal expectations; they encourage each other and their children to try and absorb the mindset of the white leaders to understand why life is the way it is, even if it is not fair. The

characters in the text engage in kinds of perspective taking, which allows for young adult readers to do the same.

Strategies to Encourage Perspective Taking

Drama and performance can be helpful in the English classroom. English Education researcher and teacher Jeffrey Wilhelm says, "techniques of story theatre (using the text as a script) to help students experience the world of a text, and techniques of drama (using the text as a starting point) to help them explore the implications and possibilities at the edge of texts" can help readers "rethink the nature and possibilities of reading," (Wilhelm, 2008, pg.119). Performing and assuming the role of a character involves taking on the perspective of the character, rather than one's own perspective. Designing activities based on performance arts can encourage, and force, students to think and be in another's shoes (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 58). Questioning and discussion come into focus as well, because the language that is used to pose questions or discuss the text can make an impact on how students perceive the text, as well as the concept of perspective taking. Using exploratory or distancing language can help create the barrier between the text, and the student's personal beliefs which can create a sense of more safety and less risk (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 57). For example, responses to questions may be phrased "One might say that…" or "I'm not so sure about this, but one idea could be…" (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 58). When questions and discussions are lead and framed in that manner, the language sets the students up to entertain alternative perspectives. Writing is another major aspect of the content area, and it presents opportunity for students to entertain alternative perspectives. Keeping writing activities individual and anonymous can help students participate because they are not in direct conflict with another student or someone's personal ideas, rather they are responding to what someone said about a text (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 59).

These strategies can be applied to perspective taking across different types of texts. One of the case study novels that I will dig into deeper is *Sold,* by Patricia McCormick. I will use this novel to illustrate how to create opportunities to incorporate drama, questioning techniques, and writing to encourage perspective taking. The book has some controversial and complex issues of exploitation, so to encourage perspective taking I would include aspects of questioning, writing, and drama (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 57-59). Later, I will return to *Sold* to discuss more options for perspective taking. Right now my aim is to use the novel to illustrate how the techniques to foster perspective taking can be implemented into instruction. I would begin the activity by having students start with a broad free-write on the prompt: *Write about a time where you felt betrayed. Discuss who betrayed you and why you felt betrayed. Be sure to include how the situation was resolved, if it was resolved.* The writing would serve as a basis for activating prior knowledge and personal viewpoints on betrayal. It could also help lead into the discussion. In the discussion following the free-write I would ask students to share their responses. After students began sharing, I would push them to consider the perspective of the betrayer. I would frame questions in a way that encouraged this thinking. For example I might say: "What was Johnny's reason for betraying you? What did he say? Is it possible that what you thought was betrayal might have been something different?" I would then potentially open up questioning to the class and ask something like "Can anyone think of a situation that Johnny might have been going through or something he might have been thinking to cause him to act the way he did?" These types of discussion questions encourage the students to think about the scenario in a different way. They can begin to see that other frames of mind exist and that the alternate perspectives could be reasonable.

Finally, I would move students toward an activity related to the novel, *Sold.* I would ask them to consider the exercise they just completed and then consider Lakshami being sold from a different perspective. Students would be able to choose to write a short poem from two of the following characters perspectives: Lakshmi's mother, Lakshmi's step-father, or Mumtaz. Each of these characters would present good opportunities, but Mumtaz could be particularly interesting because she can be seen as the aggressor, or as a victim of her society. In these poems I would ask students to focus on the questions: Why did you sell Lakshmi or why do you contribute to sexual exploitation by purchasing girls and making them be prostitutes? I would encourage students to think about the cultural issues, the financial issues, and any other cause that they see relevant. Through one lesson in this manner, writing, discussing, practicing, students will be able to practice perspective taking and simultaneously engage with the ideas beyond the pages of the text.

Questioning and language would be a larger part of facilitating such a deep text. I would try to pose questions each day about the previous reading. This could happen in the form of a bellringer, which incorporates writing simultaneously. I might have students address a prompt about Lakshmi's parents selling her by saying tell me what "some people might say" about Lakshmi's parents selling her into the sex trade (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 58). I would also give them specific perspectives to grapple with on different days, depending on the previous reading.

Cautions when Using Multi-Cultural Texts

Approaching a multi-cultural text, or a text that is outside a particular reader's normal culture and environment, should be carefully considered and presented because the situations and

contents of multi-cultural texts can be controversial. Multi-cultural literature is broadly defined as "literature that focuses on people of color, on religious minorities, on regional cultures, on the disabled, and on the aged," (Harris, as cited in Rogers and Soter, 1992, pg.145). Complex and unfamiliar situations can be difficult to comprehend and analyze; when using multi-cultural literature, or diverse texts, in the classroom it is suggested that there should be emphasis on similarities because "everyone experiences the same universal feelings," (Bushman and Haas, 2006, pg. 194). Essentially, there needs to be balance and tact when using these texts. Perspective taking is a way to approach these types of texts without offending students, or deliberately expecting them to change. It respects their current beliefs, while also saying that other opinions and cultures are valued. Students may sometimes be asked to take a perspective that may feel uncomfortable to them; as such, students may feel like they are being grouped in with the oppressors in some situations. For example, if students were reading a text about slavery in the south, some white students may feel like they are being stereotyped as the oppressor in present day as well because of cultural issues, or even comments made inside the classroom. In other situations the situation can become minimalized when compared with students' lives (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 54). This means that teachers need to be mindful of how students are comparing these difficult texts to their own lives because stripping the issues down to a basic level may undercut the seriousness of a situation. For example, if a teacher were going to have students read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, they could take the broad approach of "who has ever felt like they were treated unfairly?" Now, most people feel at some point that they have been treated unfairly, and it is acceptable to take that angle, but the level of mistreatment should be emphasized because in Anne Frank's case it is more oppression than unfairness. Teachers must also be careful not to allow students to misunderstand perspective taking activities as equal to

having lived through a particular experience. When asking students to relate the experiences of the text with their own lives "teachers may do a disservice to students by leaving them with the impression that they can authentically understand situations that they haven't and may never fully experience," (Beach, Parks, Thein, 2007, pg. 54). This means that teachers need to be mindful and vigilant when it comes to explaining the situations to students. Much like the example above with Anne Frank, ensuring that students don't feel exactly how the characters did, but rather that they can feel an emotional response that is close. In short, it is always better to err on the side of caution and consider the details of the text, the activities planned, and the personalities, dispositions, and demographics of the students.

Perspective Taking and Ethics

Perspective taking as a means of accessing culturally diverse texts should be positioned alongside the concept of ethical reading – reading that encourages tentative thinking, uncertainty, and reader ownership of uncertainty (Sloan and Thein, 2012, p. 315). Ethical reading pushes readers to respond to the text, and pushes them to continue evaluating their positions and ideals about a text throughout and beyond the reading process. Ethical reading is critical in helping with perspective taking because it makes students "become responsible for their own positions, stances, and beliefs rather than authoritatively or moralistically assuming those beliefs are universally held norms," (Sloan and Thein, 2012, pg. 322). Ethical reading is different than open-ended reader response. The reader response centered classroom is often based on personal experience, valuing students' beliefs based on opinions rather than critical analyses of the text (Sloan and Thein, 2012, pg. 322). In a reader response centered classroom the reader has no accountability for interpretation, meaning that while they are responding to the text, there is no need or call for justification of that response. The ethical reading classroom requires readers to

position their opinions within text, and recognize issues as real, even if they do not agree. Students then may begin the process of putting their opinions alongside issues of the text in an attempt to evaluate their existing beliefs. In ethical reading response classroom "teachers encourage ownership of initial responses, genuine and continual consideration of conflicting views, and a position of one's response in relation to those of others," (Sloan and Thein, 2012, pg. 315). A classroom that relies only on reader response may not require or encourage recognition of other's ideas and opinions; a classroom that relies on ethical reading and perspective taking encourages and requires readers to recognize alternative ways of thinking and living exist (Sloan and Thein). Each individual reader will still respond differently based on personal circumstances. The difference is that ethical reading and perspective taking in tandem helps create a reading environment that does not allow the reader to neglect alternate viewpoints. The reader should be affectively challenged to consider their beliefs and culture in tandem with the culture and beliefs of the textual world because this allows for alternate understandings, and essentially can open the door for each reader to interpret the text in multiple and more complex ways.

It is no secret that not all of the young adults in our classrooms love to read, but that makes it more important to help guide the reading process, especially when reading non-western texts. To clarify, I don't mean that instructors should dictate the reading process, rather that they should serve as active planners, and facilitators during the reading process, especially when dealing with topics that are not close to home for these readers. Using the concepts of ethical reading and perspective taking can help alleviate some of the tension because students are being consistently challenged to re-consider and potentially amend their original thoughts and ideas.

A Closer Look: Perspective Taking, Cultural Access, and Potential Empathetic Response

Using perspective taking to access multi-cultural texts presents the new ideals and cultures as "other" to our readers. It requires them to recognize the ideals as "other," because not every perspective they consider is their own. Providing opportunities for adolescent readers to take the perspective of the "other" allows for recognition of a different culture, and further, allows for potential exploration and recognition of potential issues within that culture. This creates the potential for increased depth, questioning, and responding to a text. One kind of deeper emotional responses that is particularly associated with texts outside a reader's comfort zone is narrative empathy (Keen, 2006, pg. 208-210). Narrative empathy is essentially what happens when a reader responds emotionally to a text or character that is not similar to the reader's own situation. One type of narrative empathy is ambassadorial strategic empathy, which focuses on individuals outside of a specific group in order to bring those outside individuals to recognize a certain problem or ideal within an inside group (Keen, 2006, p. 215). Perspective taking and ambassadorial strategic empathy have the same goal when it comes to multi-cultural literature. They both seek to bring those outside, potentially unaware of a problem, to the inside, or awareness, of the problem. Taken together, ambassadorial strategic empathy and perspective taking could look something like this: Students and the teacher read a collection of poems that discuss Americans from *Sold* (McCormick, 2008). It is important to note that Americans are depicted both as humanitarians and as predators in these poems. Then the teachers and students could discuss how the poems portray Americans differently, and then further if one portrayal is more accurate. This type of discussion can lead directly into a short activity where students are asked to write a poem from Mumtaz's perspective on Americans and then another poem from the rescuing American's perspective. Pitting these two minor characters mindsets against each other can help set up the recognition of two different types of thinking, as well as encourage students

to consider and fully take on the perspective of each side. This activity combines both ambassadorial strategic empathy and perspective taking because the student has to recognize the logistics and emotions that each character will have toward the other (ambassadorial strategic empathy), and equally important the student has to consider why the characters feel the way that they do and reproduce that tone and sense of feeling. They have to fully engage and take on the perspective of each character in a formal and objective manner, without recognizing one side as better, or more correct, than the other side.

Moving beyond perspective taking into the realms of emotional response is important because it deepens the level of cognition and analysis for readers. Readers are able to discover more about themselves in relation to the text, and knowledge about the new culture or idea. These are texts across the Young Adult sub-genres that present opportunities for deeper cognition and enhanced cultural understanding.

Novel Introductions

In the following two novels – *Sold* (2008) by Patricia McCormick and *Endangered* (2012) by Eliot Schrefer – the characters, cultures, and environments are far outside the realm of normal western culture. Each novel also presents interesting character situations. Both novels include western and non-western characters that create cultural implications and tensions. *Endangered* adds another layer by including an animal as a main character, and that provides the opportunity for deep thinking and perspective taking on an entirely new level. Each novel presents opportunities for social consideration: the international sex trade with *Sold,* and civil war for *Endangered.* Taking a closer look at these two novels will demonstrate what types of

texts are good selections for implementing perspective taking strategies and the potential questions and opportunities that they provide for discussion, writing, and literacy growth.

A Deeper Look: *Sold* by Patricia McCormick

Sold relates the troubling world of the international sex trade, focused in Nepal, through the eyes and mind of thirteen-year old Lakshmi. Lakshmi's step-father sells her into the sex trade where she experiences the many trials that develop as a result of sexual exploitation, mistreatment, and growing older. Lakshmi's story and narration is enhanced by the non-traditional, poetic style of the novel. Her ideas come off the pages as a series of poems that represent the moments that are memorable and impactful. Lakshmi, as well as her supporting characters, are almost wholly non-white, non-American, young adults, and these characters each cope with complex personal situations that are representations of larger global and cultural issues (McCormick, 2008).

Opportunities for Perspective Taking in *Sold*

The previous example from *Sold* was presented as an example of how a teacher might approach teaching the novel in general ways; the examples that follow will be more specific and focused within the novel. *Sold* presents opportunities that encourage and enhance perspective taking in a few different ways. First, the unique narrative style implicitly encourages perspective taking. The novel is told entirely as a series of poems, and the poems are told from Lakshmi's point of view. The short, choppy nature of the poems coupled with the first person point of view can impact the reading experience because the form only allows the readers into the situation through Lakshmi's perspective. If they are reading, they have to read it from her point of view as Lakshmi is experiencing it. The poetic nature pushes readers to consider the situation from

Lakshmi's perspective because she chooses only to tell certain stories, and further Lakshmi only tells the story as she experiences it; She omits any commentary or outside emotional perspectives.

The point of view and poetic form provide opportunities for perspective taking because they encourage the reader to take on the perspective of Lakshmi if they are engaged with the novel. This perspective is most likely different from the reader's own perspective, and even the perspective of articles, documentaries, or stories that they have been exposed to before. The reader gets to know one character deeply which allows for students to come to recognize and potentially understand Lakshmi's situation.

Beyond the style, the words and situations presented in the novel provide opportunity for perspective taking. Most American students are not presented with situations like Lakshmi. The concept is far away and foreign to American culture. Students have likely heard about or read about sexual exploitation, but most of them have probably not experienced the situation firsthand, or even heard a first hand account. *Sold* gives these readers the chance to take on that perspective. The first person point of view lets readers experience the pains and happenings of sexual slavery in a limited way if they assume the perspective of Lakshmi's character.

For example, near the beginning of her journey, Lakshmi relates the moment where she was sold to her long-time captor, Mumtaz. The woman that her step-father sold her to was negotiating with Mumtaz's people. Lakshmi describes hearing numbers and she says "Auntie goes high./ The man goes low./ Eventually they agree and the man gives Auntie a roll of rupee notes./ I do not know what they have agreed to./ But I do know this:/ he gives her nearly enough money to buy a water buffalo." (McCormick, 2008, Pg. 74) In this particular situation, Lakshmi

is confused. She is working through the conversation and relating her thoughts along the way, until she comes to a realization: she has been sold for a high price, but has also been equated with an animal being sold on the market. The way it is written, the reader is experiencing the situation alongside her. They can experience the confusion. They can experience the realization at the same time the character is realizing these things. Experiencing the confusion is important because it pushes the reader to practice higher levels of critical thinking and analysis before coming to any conclusions. The process of change can push the reader's ideas to change direction multiple times before they have a chance to become stabilized.

The novel also has multiple situations involving Americans as Lakshmi's time in captivity progresses. Lakshmi is not extremely familiar with the American culture, which serves as a source of inner tension. The first time Lakshmi encounters an American visitor, she is skeptical, but hopeful through the entire visit. She has been warned from Anita about Americans. At one point in the novel Lakshmi says Anita warns her that the Americans will try to trick her and then that they will publicly shame her when she falls for it (McCormick, 2008, pg. 142). Still, Lakshmi never believed or disbelieved what the other girls said about Americans. Later in the novel she says "I want to pummel this pink-skinned man with my fists./ I want to spit on this stranger with his eyes of cold pity,/ his idiot way of speaking my language, and his bad-mannered/questions that make me look at the humiliation that is my life." (McCormick, 2008, pg. 204) In this moment Lakshmi does not understand the American. She finds him confusing, and she becomes angry because he causes her to reflect on her own life. This is an instance of Lakshmi beginning to feel the tension between what she was and who she sees herself as being now. She is engaging in the evaluative portion of perspective taking. She is positioning what this

man is asking and implying next to what she believes, and then trying to make sense of everything.

This is not the only time that Lakshmi is finding tension within herself regarding Americans. After her first visit from an American, she has another American visitor. In her optimism, she tries to communicate with him about rescue, but instead realizes he is drunk. He is " a bad American." (McCormick, 2008, pg. 222) This furthers the tension that Lakshmi has when it come to Americans. She does not know what to believe and she continually evaluates until the end of the novel when the first American comes back to take her to safety. (McCormick, 2008, pg. 261-63)

The situations involving the Americans present opportunities for perspective taking in a couple of ways. First, they demonstrate one of the aspects of life that Lakshmi herself is constantly in a state of confusion and re-consideration about. With her inner tension, and the first person point of view nature of the novel, the reader can more directly feel the tension as well. It can trigger more inner tension and self-evaluation in the reader because the reader could mirror what Lakshmi is experiencing. The second way it presents an opportunity is that it depicts an American reader's culture in two different ways. Americans are exploiters in some scenarios. They are also depicted as sneaky by the other girls. At the same time, they are depicted as a symbol of hope, and in the end of the novel an American man actually comes back to rescue Lakshmi. In this way the reader is presented with two different, objective, views of their own culture. This could be a point of tension within the reader regarding his or her own culture. Both situations provide opportunity for self-evaluation in terms of other's perspectives.

An American reader could use these passages to evaluate the principles they believe in, especially related to their own heritage. They may conclude that Americans aren't great because they neglect and sometimes support the kinds of exploitation that Lakshmi is experiencing. Conversely, the reader could feel a sense of pride because Lakshmi was rescued by an American. Responses can and will vary for individual students, but the differing portrayal of the Americans creates tension.

The examples of perspective taking opportunities also can set the opportunity for deeper emotional response into action. Readers may go on to experience a deeper, empathetic connection, when it comes to *Sold.* If the readers take an alternate perspective, they are practicing the first part of ambassadorial strategic empathy (Keen, 2006, pg. 215). This means that the readers are recognizing a situation exists outside their culture. They do not necessarily change based on what they have experienced with *Sold,* but they may which would be the deeper level of empathy and emotional response.

Classroom Application: Using *Sold* to Promote Perspective Taking

There are several ways a classroom teacher could use *Sold* to promote perspective taking. After reading and guiding students through Sold in a classroom centered on ethical reading and perspective taking, a teacher could have students complete a final assignment that focuses on life after the end of the novel, because the novel ends with Lakshmi telling the American her name, age, and that she is from Nepal (McCormick, 2008, pg. 263). As discussed above, Lakshmi experienced tensions within herself. She was searching to find out if she lost herself and to evaluate herself for what she had become. At one point she even says " But I wonder. If the crying of a young girl is the same to me as the bleating of the horns in the street below, what

have *I* become?" (McCormick, 2008, Pg. 231). This poem is especially significant because it is one of several moments where Lakshmi is questioning her own identity and her transformation. A teacher could pull this poem and similar poems from the novel where Lakshmi is questioning what she has become or who she is. Then, the teacher could ask students to write the end of the novel in a series of at least three poems. Students would have to maintain the perspective of Lakshmi, but they would have the freedom to interpret how she, or they, would feel if they were in that situation. This activity would allow for students to demonstrate that they consider a situation from an alternate perspective, and that they can position that alternate perspective in tandem with their own beliefs. It also gives students a chance to demonstrate higher order thinking and complex writing skills.

A Deeper Look: *Endangered* by Eliot Schrefer

Endangered (2012) chronicles the journey of Sophie, a young Congolese-American girl, in her quest through the jungles of the Congo during wartime. Normally Sophie lives in Miami with her father but she is spending the summer with her mother in the Congo. Sophie's mother operates a bonobo rescue center in the Congo where she takes in bonobos because they are commonly mistreated and hunted in the country. Sophie finds herself in a difficult situation where she illegally purchases an injured bonobo, Otto, from a Congolese man. When war breaks out, the American plane comes to take Sophie home. When Sophie realizes she cannot take Otto back to Miami, Sophie and Otto flee into the depths of the Congolese wilderness to try to survive together.

Opportunities for Perspective Taking in *Endangered*

Much like *Sold, Endangered* presents many different ways that a reader could take on alternate perspectives. The novel is written in first person so the reader does only get to experience the story from main character Sophie's point of view. That is beneficial because Sophie's character inserts emotion into her thinking. Her thinking is more verbose, and it changes direction frequently, as Sophie inserts commentary on a regular basis. For example she is talking about her mother and says " this was the thing with my mother – she could never admit there was a space between right and wrong. Remaining at the sanctuary had been right, just as coming to America with me and my father would have been wrong. She couldn't be honest with me; she had to present her heart as not so much a compass as a two-way switch," (Schrefer, 2012, pg. 15). Sophie is reflecting on this part of her life and evaluating her mother's actions, rather than just relating what happened. These elements provide the opportunity for readers to enter the story world and fully engage as Sophie.

The situations presented in the novel are also potential starting points for considering alternate perspectives. The book is set in Congo, amid the instability of a country on the brink of a civil war. This is important for Sophie, because Congo during the setting of the book is very different from the Congo she remembers as a child. On the first page of *Endangered*, Sophie is describing how she sees Congo now, in the time of war, versus when she was a child experiencing Congo. She says:

> The fountain in downtown Kinshasa, which I'd once thought of as the height of glamour, now looked like a bowl of broth. Bullet holes had appeared up and down it, and no one I asked could remember who had put them there. When I looked closely, the pockmarks overlapped. The Democratic Republic of the Congo: Where Even the Bullet Holes Have Bullet Holes. (Schrefer, 2012, pg.1)

In this excerpt the language is creating a mood, tone, and setting the precedent for the remainder of the story. In itself, gun violence may not be foreign to many readers, yet the way Sophie describes these bullet holes is different. The bullet holes she is seeing in Kinshasa are more common. These bullet holes are not alarming to anyone else and no one knows where they came from. The bullet holes in the Congo also just keep piling up. They are stacking on top of each other. The sheer quantity of bullet holes, as well as the uninformed nature of where they came from and why they are there makes these bullet holes different to Sophie, and potentially to the reader. As a member of both cultures, Sophie is recognizing that these bullet holes are different than bullet holes in other places. In this way, Sophie experiences the war in a different way because she has the knowledge and experience of both sides. Readers likely can't do this because they don't have the real life experience of both sides of war. She is relating that information and perspective implicitly to the reader. She is imagining and viewing the Congo as different from the United States, and in doing that, she is inviting the readers to do so as well. The book is set in the middle of a civil war that takes place as Sophie's narrative unfolds. Many of the readers in Western culture have not experienced war in the same way because there has not been a war fought on this soil in their lifetime. It can open the door for readers to experience and consider what it is like to have war going on right outside your front door.

Beyond the concept of civil war and first person point of view, Sophie's character is consistently re-evaluating her view of the world in order to survive. The tension between Miami and Congo appears throughout the entire novel. Sophie is consistently contrasting her view and the actuality of both Congolese society and American society. When Sophie is making the decision to stay in the Congo with Otto amid violent fighting, she thinks to herself: "wartime Congo was the opposite of fairy tales: The wilderness was the safe place, not the town, because

hiding was the only way to survive," (Schrefer, 2012, pg.60). In this instance, Sophie is trying to make the distinction between the Congo and Miami. In the Congo there are no fairytales. She is relating that in order to survive, one must become part of the jungle, uncivilized. Sophie then goes on to describe the fairytale as the place of towns. She recognizes that in other places (potentially her Miami home) towns provide more safety than being alone in the wilderness.Then she continues the contrast with the concept of wilderness (Congo) with fairytales and towns (Miami). Sophie is taking and acting on different perceptions and perspectives of the two cultures. She does not have a fixed mindset. Her mindset continually blends the two geographic locations and cultures. At one point she says: "During my childhood, Congo was the best place in the world because it was the only place in the world. Now I really got why someone would want to live somewhere else if she had the option." (Schrefer, 2012, pg. 29) In this thought Sophie is actually taking the perspective of someone else while considering what she actually believes. This is what the perspective taking strategy calls for. The fact that Sophie has mixed beliefs, culture, and perception is huge for readers because it allows and encourages for the readers to take the alternate (Congolese) perspective with Sophie, but in a way that may be less risky.

Assimilation becomes a major idea for Sophie throughout *Endangered* because she not only has to assimilate and switch between cultural norms and lifestyles, she must also assimilate and adopt the culture and ideals of the bonobos in order to survive in the jungle. In this way, the reader is being provided an opportunity to take the perspective of another creature that is not human. Sophie shows that she tries to adapt to other cultures – to bonobo culture – when she begins sleeping in trees in order to avoid sleeping on the wet ground during a rainstorm. However, Sophie realizes that she is no longer in civilized society when Anastasia, the matriarch

of the bonobos, knocks her out of the tree two nights in a row. Sophie realized that Anastasia has not accepted her into their community, so she begins her own perspective taking activity. She begins trying to think like the bonobos in order to survive. Sophie does this by adapting her sleeping, eating, and drinking habits as well as doing other things. At one point Sophie is reflecting on a confrontation with the maternal bonobo, Anastasia, and she says "Now it all made sense. I hadn't fallen out of my nest before – it had been here both times…I'd started a war with the queen. And I was losing," (Schrefer, 2012, pg. 103). In this scenario Sophie has come to the realization that she has been causing a disruption to the normal order of business in bonobo world. Further, she comes to the conclusion that in order to survive she needs to start "winning."

Sophie coming to these realizations that she must assimilate to the wilderness, wartime, and bonobo community in order to survive is pertinent to using this book as a means for perspective taking because the reader has the opportunity to experience the narrator taking multiple perspectives. Sophie does not necessarily adopt all of the mindsets and perspectives that she has to take, but she does try them in order to survive. At one point Sophie says: "Although it was totally new to me, this life was routine for the bonobos. This was an evening like any other to them, and from here I could fool myself that the massacre at the sanctuary had never happened." (Schrefer, 2012, pg.101) To feel the impact of this moment, it is important to know that earlier in the novel, Sophie returned to the sanctuary briefly and saw her friends and other animals massacred. She had to experience the tragic and gruesome loss up close and personal. In this moment, Sophie has come to realize what she is doing as different than her normal life, but she also realizes that she has become like the bonobos, and adapts to their every day life. She has taken on their ideas, modes of survival, and mindsets. There is another moment where Sophie is having tension between what she believes as a human and what she has learned from taking the

perspective of the bonobos. Upon running from gunfire with the group of bonobos, where Sophie witnesses one of the bonobos, Banalia, being killed. Sophie says: "They would either eat her now or smoke her body to sell the meat. It made my stomach turn – the DNA in that meat was almost 99 percent the same as human DNA; it was nearly cannibalism. But the men were hungry." (Schrefer, 2012, pg. 121) In this thought Sophie is experiencing inner tension because she has become too attached to the bonobos and has become too much like them to think about eating one, but at the same time, she is able to realistically consider that as humans, the men are trying to survive too. Moments like these are critical because they provide interesting opportunities for the reader to reflect on what they believe. The entire concept of taking on the perspective of the bonobos provides opportunity for deeper thought, analysis, and critical thinking.

By the end of the novel, Sophie is actually back in the United States in college. Sophie actually concentrates her college work on international politics and decides to use her career to bring awareness and tourism to the Congo. In the end, she is engaged and she and her husband move to the Congo so that she can continue her work. This actually indicates that she did not necessarily fully assimilate or change her life and beliefs, but rather that she went through these experiences that made her recognize alternative cultures, problems, and ways of life. Ultimately Sophie's ideas and beliefs about life become a blended version of both the American and Congolese perspectives.

Classroom Application: Using *Endangered* to Promote Perspective Taking

A teacher interested in using *Endangered* to foster perspective taking may choose to focus on the concept of bonobos, or animals that are closely related to humans. They might design a writing assignment where students were asked to write argumentative essays, from both

sides of the issue. In this case the issue would be to decide whether or not bonobos should be treated with the same respect as humans, considering all aspects, including the close link in DNA. For example, students could write one short essay supporting the claim that bonobos shouldn't have the same rights (or be treated) as humans. The students would then write the other side of the argument for the claim that bonobos should have the same rights and be treated similarly to humans. This activity would allow for students to demonstrate their understanding of the novel, but it would also allow for students to take different perspectives. The students would have to analyze the text, and think critically to form their essays. In the end they would still have their own belief, and it might even be evident in their writing, but they would have acknowledged that both sides exist.

Further Consideration

Adopting the perspective taking strategy and modifying it to fit within the individual classroom can be complicated, but can provide great opportunities for critical thinking, especially when students are engaging with multicultural, nontraditional texts such as *Endangered* or *Sold.* Perspective-taking can also further the development of critical literacy skills. My hope is that the examples of how to use the perspective taking strategy in the classroom will help teachers who are searching for different methods of engaging students with multi-cultural texts. Further, I hope that the examples of text selection and how to use perspective taking with those texts can demonstrate what kinds of texts to have students read, and how to get them to engage in critical conversation during and beyond the reading experience.

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